



Center for Global Studies

A NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Occasional Paper

J.R. McNeill
Professor
Department of History
Georgetown University

Center for Global Studies
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
June 20, 2005

This publication is supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI Program and is produced by the Center for Global Studies (CGS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The University of Illinois is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution.

CGS *Occasional Paper* series is the principal publication to circulate the research and analytical results of faculty and students associated with CGS. Publications of CGS are available upon request. For additional information consult the CGS home page on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.cgs.uiuc.edu/>
Published 2005 by CGS 2005
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
1705 Presidential Tower
325 E. John St.
Champaign, IL 61820
Series editor: Steve W. Witt
Copy editor: Beth Bailey

Global History: Research and Teaching in the 21st Century

J.R. McNeill,
Georgetown University

**Presented on June 20, 2005, Center for Global Studies,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

Center for Global Studies
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
June 20, 2005

Global History: Research and Teaching in the 21st Century

I. History and Global Studies

I must confess at the outset that I am not entirely sure what “Global Studies” might entail. Perhaps it is a successor to “International Studies,” a unit of most of the universities I have known. Perhaps it amounts to the study of processes of globalization. Perhaps it is something else altogether. Probably it is different things on different campuses.

Whatever it is—well, almost whatever it is—I welcome it. Among the chief defects of the academic study of human affairs has long been the tendency to compartmentalize, to ghettoize, to seek depth at the expense of breadth. I am well aware that specialization brings its rewards in intellectual pursuits, as in the marketplace. Among historians, for example, those who go to the trouble of learning Japanese or Farsi or Wolof understandably want to capitalize on that investment throughout their working lives. I want them to do so as well, precisely because I have not learned Japanese, Farsi or Wolof, and if I am to learn anything of the history of Japan, Persia, and Senegal it is best if I do so from people who know relevant languages.

But I also want them to situate their work in global contexts. This, I think, is where the greatest deficit in historical understanding lies. My colleagues are convinced that what historians really need is a study of the social origins of workers in the Tata steel works of Bengal, or the cultural construction of gender in southwest Nebraska in the 1920s, or maybe a study of fin-de-siecle Viennese

culture that pays proper attention to left-handers. Although I will admit to a certain impatience with some of the topics that historians write on, I don't mean to imply that 30 or 80 years ago matters were any better. Actually, the tunnel vision of historians in decades gone by was, if anything, narrower than it is now. But my point is that it is still too narrow.

Micro studies of this and that remain essential. But they remain inadequate too, at least as normally conceived. Almost nothing in history, or in the present, happened in isolation from a welter of influences, sometimes strong, sometimes weak, from far away. Almost everything can be more clearly understood through comparisons. My complaint is not that all history must be global history or even macrohistory. It is, rather, that thanks to decades of academic assiduity, it is now possible without undue labor to present any subject in a broad context, with attention to distance influences and to interesting comparisons—and therefore historians ought not to do as their forebears did, but should broaden their horizons enough to contextualize their subjects.

I know this is going against the grain of the formal training in history and for that matter in other disciplines, and to some extent against the grain of human nature. As Director of Graduate Studies in my department I see students every week wrestling with the definition of dissertation topics, drawn like moths to a flame towards subjects that only 15 people in the world will care about. I tell them they may work on the tree rather than the forest, but they should make sure that their work changes the way people see the forest. I am, as a result, a source of bafflement and irritation to students, and often to their mentors as well.

Indeed I can be a dreadful nuisance. Recently my colleagues who teach the Protestant Reformation made the mistake of allowing me to speak to a collection of graduate students. I suggested that the Reformation was one manifestation of a pan-Eurasian intellectual and religious tumult that featured the emergence of neo-Confucianism, Sikhism, the advent of a Shi'a state in Persia, and that all this was linked to 16th-century trade, truly global for the first time in history, to urbanization, and to expanded information flows that brought occasionally jarring and discordant data that helped weaken orthodoxies. The implications of this suggestion seemed monstrous to colleagues and students alike: if it were right then they needed to know something about China, India, and Islam as well as about Calvin's Geneva. My assurances that one did not need to know *much* about these places and cultures was cold comfort. They took solace in the fact that I had no document to prove the validity of this irritating

suggestion, and they feel safe in ignoring it.

Lest I irritate you with incessant whining about my professional tribe, let me assure you there are some happy examples to emulate. About a decade ago Donald Wright published a small book with the attractive and appropriate title, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*. It concerns the experience of a people, the Niumi, who live in a region of the Gambia, one of Africa's smallest countries. Very few scholars care about the Gambia, and I expect the number who care about Niumi is one and only one. But Wright had the good sense to contextualize his study. He explained how what the Niumi were doing, and what was happening to them, had roots in broader processes within West Africa, within the world of Islam, with the orbit of European imperialism, and so forth. He relied a little too directly on Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems vision for my taste, but nonetheless Wright managed to make a very compelling case for why one should pay attention to his very small place in Africa. Anyone could do this for any small place anywhere...but still too few do.

So I welcome the advent of global studies in the hope that it will help historians—and other social scientists who may be in need—learn to contextualize and to recognize large-scale and global processes at work as a matter of course.

II. Teaching World History in the 21st Century

One of the favorable developments in my profession over the past three decades is the rise of world history teaching. My father was among the pioneers in this endeavor, teaching a one-year world history survey at the University of Chicago from 1960 (I think it was) until 1982. He was, as he often puts it, politely tolerated by his colleagues. But he was bitterly disappointed that the course did not survive him at Chicago, nor did it catch on in the elite centers of learning in this or any other country.

Instead, world history courses proliferated at less exalted institutions, high schools, junior colleges, community colleges, and state universities for the most part. So far as I know, this happened chiefly in the U.S., but on some scale it occurred elsewhere as well, New Zealand universities being one instance with which I am passingly familiar. In the U.S. I believe the main motive for launching world history courses was political. As immigration and identity politics gathered force, the only reliably inoffensive survey course was world

history. Where curricular decisions were made by committees, or had to win approval from county or state authorities, the path of least political resistance led to world history. No doubt other, more noble motives had some role as well. For example, in an increasingly interactive world, one could and should argue, the most appropriate unit for historical analysis is the global one. But this logical, intellectual rationale seems not to have persuaded many teachers and curricular planners in private schools and universities, which leads me to think that the ignoble motives have helped world history courses to proliferate. So be it: good things may happen for the wrong reasons.

The rise of world history as a teaching enterprise is remarkable. I have not sought the latest statistics on the matter, but if things continue as in the recent past, soon more high school students will be taking the AP world history test (introduced only three years ago I think) than the (longstanding) European AP history test. Undergraduate enrollments in world history courses will, I wager, in a few years outnumber enrollments in any other survey, except American history. All this I regard as welcome.

World history courses have still made little headway at the elite universities. Princeton recently instituted a team-taught one, which perhaps will outlast the retirement of its moving spirit. But for the most part, the elite research universities are content with the status quo—it serves them well enough after all. I do not expect to see that change much in the next 20 years, but would be happy to be wrong.

The emergence of world history courses has of course brought with it a gigantic problem. It is not easy to teach. And it is not easy for students to learn. This is one sensible objection to such courses, for which I have heard the answer that anything this worth doing is worth doing badly. I am not sure that is true. Students and teachers alike can easily be intimidated and put off by the huge jumble of data. This is of course true of physics or chemistry too. But they have a framework, a structure, a sequence – one fairly well agreed upon I believe – so that it is possible in an introductory course to get a sense of the whole, even if one does not master the details. This, obviously, is what a world history course should aspire to.

But it is still not easy, because there is no generally agreed upon framework through which to get a sense of the whole. Historians are by and large allergic to overt social theory, although for a while in my youth quite a

number found Marxism congenial and persuasive. Instead, they revel in particularities, and make supercilious remarks to one another when specialists in historical sociology or international relations try to draw theoretical conclusions (I confess I do this frequently—as I said I can be a real nuisance).

World history as an exercise in addition, piling the history of China upon that of India upon that of Mesopotamia upon that of Europe and so forth gets one nowhere. It is often done, I fear, but makes no more sense than teaching the history of the United States by doing the history of Maine, then that of New Hampshire, Vermont and so forth.

One can provide a framework for the study of world history by regarding the whole thing as a struggle in which civilizations compete with one another for primacy (however that is to be measured). While we were writing *The Human Web*, I used to tease my father about this, because I thought he wanted the human past presented as the equivalent of a horse race of civilizations. In this conception, most of the human population can be assigned to one or another civilization, and while one pays attention to all of them, one focuses particularly upon that which at any given time is leading the pack. How one knows which one is leading the pack is an obvious question. My dad's answer to it is that one knows because other civilizations imitate the leader in technology, art, and so forth. While I think there are problems with measuring who is ahead in this approach to world history, more fundamentally I think the problem is that civilizations—coherent expressions of elite culture—do not compete with one another in any meaningful sense. Individuals, tribes, chiefs, states, firms all may compete with their counterparts, and do so consciously, organizing their efforts accordingly. But not civilizations.

Today in world history teaching the most persuasive model is one we might dub the Bentley model, not because a luxury car is an improvement over a horse race, but because its most tireless promoter is Jerry Bentley of the University of Hawaii, lead author of the market-leading textbook in world history and editor of the *Journal of World History*. In the Bentley model, world history is all about interaction, encounters, and exchange not necessarily among civilizations, a concept that plays a much smaller role in the Bentley model, but simply among peoples. Bentley's version relies much less upon concepts of “advanced” and “backward” or “primacy” or “cultural gradient” and “diffusion”. It shares the emphasis upon exchange, the notion that change most often derives from the example or threat one group of people encounter when put in contact

with another. But it arranges encounters in a less systematic, less hierarchical way. In that respect one may complain that is less a framework than an approach or even a filter, something that helps one choose what to emphasize. But even if this is all that it is, a basis for intelligent selection of what to pay attention to is a great service for the world history teacher and student.

A third model, as yet not popular, is that championed by David Christian in the U.S. and Fred Spier in the Netherlands, one that they call “Big History.” They, and a few others, teach world history in the context of a grand cosmic evolution. They begin at the beginning, with the Big Bang, and proceed through the evolution of the Universe, the Milky Way, the solar system, earth history, life on earth, human evolution, and then the conventional era that historians like to regard as human history. This approach has a great deal to recommend it in intellectual terms, and really drives home the concept of the context of human affairs, and our insignificance in the immensities of time and space. But as a practical matter, it has certain problems. One is the demands it makes on the teacher, who must learn a bit about cosmology, astrophysics, geology, evolutionary biology, and primate evolution. Christian and Spier, and a few others, have done so impressively. But as one can readily appreciate, this is tougher than learning about China, India, Africa and so forth. Of course it makes parallel demands on students. Happily Christian has written up his course in a book called *Maps of Time*, so that in two or three hours you can learn what you might need to know about all these subjects. The second practical problem is that to the extent that one makes time in one’s course for the history of life on earth or the formation of galaxies, one takes time away from the study of human history. In Christian’s book, a sizeable tome of more than 400 pages, humans show up around page 140. I think the proportions are the same in his course.

My own practice in recent years has been to squeeze the Big History approach into an introductory lecture, trying to get across the point of it – the nested evolutions of everything and the tiny proportions of space and time occupied by humanity. From there I have tended to follow the Bentley model, and to use Bentley’s textbook. But if I were tsar of the curriculum at my university I would change the history requirements altogether, and we would require three semesters (as we do now) of history arranged as follows. The first would be a world history since the Mongols (meaning since the 13th century) course, emphasizing interaction and interdependence, arguing in effect that what students know as globalization, and tend to regard as a distinction of their own lifetimes, is an ancient process. The second would be a course on the history of

the Western world since the Renaissance, emphasizing cultural, intellectual matters—a very traditional course in some respects, like the one instituted at Columbia around 1920, the point of which would be to have students read Machiavelli, Rousseau, Freud and all the rest of the usual suspects, which I think is still useful. The third semester would be devoted to the study of their own country, the U.S., in global context. I do not expect to be appointed tsar of curriculum any time soon, and if I were my colleagues would find these reforms objectionable in a hundred ways, especially those in U.S. history.

It is I fear easier to write a book than to reform a curriculum, which brings me to the final portion of my talk this morning, the subject of research in global history.

III. One Approach to Global History Scholarship: The Human Web

First of all, I want to make clear that I am content with grand narratives in world history as an admissible research ambition for historians. The idea of grand narratives has lately come under attack, partly because it seems to drain history of its moral content if only one sentence is devoted to, say, the Holocaust, partly because accuracy is more difficult to ensure, partly for other reasons.

I am not fully content with any specific ones, not even ones that I took part in composing, but am eager to defend the ambition. There are many things that cannot be done perfectly, that cannot be done to everyone's satisfaction, that by their nature involve distortions. Indeed I would suppose this is the case for every non-trivial intellectual project involving the human sciences. To confine one's analysis to smaller scales in quests for greater accuracy or even moral integrity strikes me as defeatist and unsatisfactory. Followed to its logical conclusion, this viewpoint would find illegitimate anything more sweeping than autobiography, a genre, I need scarcely add, not distinguished by its accuracy or moral probity. Different problems are best approached on different scales, and some are best approached on global scales. Historians, collectively, can only improve their craft by working on all scales simultaneously, situating smaller-scale work in larger visions, and building larger visions on the basis of smaller-scale work.

One way to order the confusion of the human past is to emphasize what cannot be empirically verified, what I like to call the “dark matter of history.” Dark matter exists widely throughout the universe, although it cannot be directly observed. Astronomers and cosmologists know little or nothing about its nature, but they are certain it must be there, because of observable effects on observable components of the universe, such as light itself or the rotational speed of galaxies. Dark matter must exist because something is exerting strong gravitational pulls on things we can detect and measure. According to prevailing notions, about 88% of the matter in the universe is such unobservable stuff, because it does not emit light or radio waves, and is (most of it anyway) not composed of the familiar atomic particles. So it’s out there, it’s plentiful, and it’s powerful, even if we can’t see it.

Webs of interaction, the concept that my father and I used in a recent attempt to give shape to world history, are like dark matter. No document in any archive refers to them, and no archeological remnant directly attests to them. Yet they or something like them must have existed, because of patterns one can observe in the archival and archeological record—and now, one should, add in the genomic evidence too. They’re out there and over time they became powerful—even if we can’t see them.

In our scheme there were multiple webs, created at different times, sometimes destroying their predecessors but sometimes layered over them. All humankind from the earliest times has participated in a very loose human web. After all, we remain a single species, we all use language and fire. But this general web did not deeply affect individual or group behavior. It was too loose, the world was too large, and people too few, so interactions were rare, at least by later standards.

When people developed agriculture, or learned to exploit particularly rich fishing grounds, they created sedentary styles of life and social organization larger than the hunting and foraging band, the characteristic social cell of pre-agricultural history. They accordingly created webs of interaction involving several hundred people, sometimes several thousand, in routine exchanges of information, threats, microbes, as well as goods and services. These webs we call local webs, because their scale remained small, involving at most scores of villages, normally adjacent ones.

With the evolution of cities, a process that began nearly 6,000 years ago,

webs grew larger. Cities served as crossroads and centers of exchange, and many of their inhabitants made their livings organizing and directing exchanges. By 4,000 years ago, there were a few cities with more than 10,000 people, interacting among themselves and also with agricultural villagers, and often with pastoralists or fisherfolk as well. Cities promoted clusters of ideas and practices (“culture”) that proved attractive to many of those exposed to them. Cities provided large markets for all manner of products. Hence webs centered on cities directed, regulated, shaped the behavior, both spiritual and material, of many tens of thousands, eventually millions, of people. These sets of interactions we refer to as metropolitan webs. The first one emerged in Mesopotamia and its hinterlands.¹

Soon multiple cities developed routine interactions over long distances, thanks to river traffic or to donkey and later camel caravans. Where communications and transport technology (and geography) permitted, as in ancient Egypt for example, several million people could participate in a unified cultural system and a single market, at least for some sorts of goods. They also took part in an ecological common market, exchanging seeds, animals, and pathogens routinely. Albeit with somewhat less integration and density of interaction, the populations of eastern China, had evolved a similar web by roughly 500 BCE – the middle of the so-called Warring State Period in Chinese history. --This may be the place to emphasize that interaction need not be benign to be important: warfare is a form of communication too, even if the messages exchanged are chiefly intended or understood as threats.

At the same time, the whole region between the Indus and the Nile had knitted itself together in a large web of multiple cultures, but all linked in routine interaction by traders, beasts of burden, ships, and armies. In the Americas, a smaller such web was simultaneously forming in Mesoamerica, involving fewer people, less space, less efficient communication and transportation, due to the absence of pack animals and the as yet minimal role of writing. All these were examples of what we call regional webs.

Over time webs could come and go. They could dissolve as connections were broken by physical destruction, by population decline. But more often they grew and merged.

¹ It is not the same as a civilization. The metropolitan webs involved people who were in the conventional parlance civilized, but also those who were uncivilized, who had no settled homes, who spoke only unwritten languages.

By about 1 A.D., a large slice of Eurasia and North Africa had coalesced into a gigantic regional web, one so large and significant as to deserve its own name, the Old World Web. This is a familiar unit of world history, variously termed by authors such as Toynbee, Marshall Hodgson, Philip Curtin, William McNeill and Janet Abu-Lughod. At some point, and there is widely divergent opinion on this, parts of sub-Saharan Africa participated actively in this web too. Interestingly, it was about this time that the first recognition took place – or at least the first of which I am aware -- of the sort of intercommunication that underpins this whole approach to history. Polybius, who died in 118 BCE, wrote of the period around 200 BCE.:

Now in earlier times the world's history had consisted, so to speak, of a series of unrelated episodes, the origins and results of each being as widely separated as their localities, but from this point onward history becomes an organic whole: the affairs of Italy and Africa are connected with those of Asia and Greece, and all events bear a relationship and contribute to a single end.²

Now of course Polybius was referring only to the Mediterranean world: Africa meant North Africa and Asia meant Asia Minor. But this was most of the world as he knew it, and he recognized the emergence of interconnection, and the power of it, in a way that modern world historians are just coming around to in recent decades.

Back to the webs. A millennium or so later, a large-scale web also coalesced in the Americas, centered on Mesoamerica. Cultural traits such as the court ballgame appeared widely around the Caribbean. Maize cultivation spread into what would be the southeastern United States. A few trade goods testify to long-distance linkages in North America and between MesoAmerica and the northern reaches of South America. But this American web never achieved the density of interaction of the Old World Web, probably mainly due to the inefficiencies of communication and transport alluded to earlier, but it was also true, and probably relevant, that population levels in the Americas remained far below those of the Old World, and probably true that the big clusters in MesoAmerica and in the Andes were smaller than the big clusters in China or

² Polybius, *The Histories*, Book I, ch. 3.

the Eastern Mediterranean. At any rate, the Americas too were developing a growing web when in the 15th and 16th century the world's webs were knitted together by oceanic voyaging.

In a process long familiar to world historians, Chinese, Malay and above all Atlantic European mariners brought the world's coastlines into sustained and eventually routine contact between 1405 – the first of the Ming voyages – and 1790, by which time Australia and the northwest coasts of North America had entered what was now a unified worldwide web. Only a few inhabited islands and remote continental interiors remained unaffected.

This however was not the final stage – there will be no final stage to history until the extinction of our species. The worldwide web grew and grew, in Siberia, in Africa, in the Americas and elsewhere, and it also tightened. More and more information, more and more goods circulated within it, and the sort of systemic unity that Polybius remarked upon became stronger and stronger, albeit with occasional temporary setbacks. Today's age of globalization is one chapter in this saga, not the first and assuredly not the last.

This metaphor of the webs is based on the assumption that information and communication are fundamental to human behavior and the paths of history. We are human because of our capacity for information processing and communication. It is through communication and the cooperation it permits that we achieve social power over our fellows, and influence over other elements of nature (insofar as we have it). Therefore the business of communication, via language, writing, printing, and electronic media was crucial to the formation and sustainability of human webs. So was the technology of transport, from rafts and donkeys to container ships and airplanes.

But it was not and is not merely communications and transport technology that have created and altered webs of history. War and conquest tightened the Old World Web in the era of the Mongol Empire. Religious enthusiasm helped integrate West Africa and Polynesia into larger webs. Profit-seeking played its role. So did immutable aspects of the earth's geography, such as prevailing winds. All these things, and a few more besides, combined to create the communication regimes we call webs.

IV. Conclusion

It is sometimes said that all historians are really writing about the present. Be that as it may, it seems appropriate and fruitful for historians to consider the changes afoot in the world today—everything that we colloquially call globalization—and to seek their roots and their parallels in the past. If there is anything useful historians can do these days (and I naturally believe there is), it is to provide global historical perspectives for global studies.